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South Korea sets beef talks with Canada in June

433 words
2 April 2009
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Reuters News
English
(c) 2009 Reuters Limited

SEOUL, April 2 (Reuters) - South Korea said on Thursday it would resume talks in June on Canadian beef imports, pressured by Canada to set a timeline to reopen what was once the fourth-biggest export market for the meat.

South Korea is one of two countries, along with mainland China, that has refused to reopen its borders to Canadian beef since the 2003 discovery of a case of **mad cow** disease in western Canada.

"We'll hold talks over technical issues with Canada in late June to review the issue of resuming imports," South Korea's agriculture minister Chang Tae-pyong told reporters.

The decision comes after Canada's agriculture minister Gerry Ritz visited Seoul in late March to push for the talks and threatened otherwise to bring the issue to the WTO.

South Korea has been reluctant to reopen its beef market after strong protests over the resumption of U.S. beef imports last year and Canada reported its 15th case of **mad cow** disease in November.

"We do not accept the Korean government's claim that they have difficulty justifying the immediate resumption of trade in Canadian beef due to additional cases of **BSE (mad cow disease)** in Canada," Canada Beef Export Federation President Ted Haney said last week in Seoul.

"Canada's case history is not indicative of a growing risk but instead is a reflection of the declining and disappearing risk. The low number of past cases represent the results of Canada's pre-enhanced feed ban."

South Korea imported 17,000 tonnes of Canadian beef in the year before the ban was implemented in 2003, according to the Canada Beef Export Federation.

The Canadian beef industry, which is expected to produce an estimated 1.5 million tonnes of beef in 2009, has struggled with low prices, high feed rates and new U.S. labeling rules that farmers fear will discourage packers from buying Canadian.

Fears of **mad cow** disease have made North American beef a touchy subject in South Korea. The announcement last year that it would resume imports of U.S. beef sparked massive public protests.

The fatal disease, also called **bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE)**, affects a cow's nervous system and causes brain degeneration. People can become infected and die from a variant of the disease called Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease by eating infected beef.

The disease spreads to cattle through contaminated feed. (Reporting by Miyoung Kim; Editing by Jonathan Hopfner)

KOREA-BEEF/LANGEN|ABN|C|GRO|E|U|CANT|MTL|SOF|DNP|PCO|PCM

Document LBA0000020090402e542000bs



REUTERS

108

USDA to make \$150 mln MILC dairy subsidy payment

249 words
1 April 2009
10:01
Reuters News
English
(c) 2009 Reuters Limited

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Reuters) - The U.S. Agriculture Department said on Wednesday it will make payments totaling \$150 million to dairy farmers participating in the Milk Income Loss Contract subsidy program.

USDA makes MILC payments on a monthly basis when the Boston Class I milk price falls below \$16.94 per hundredweight as adjusted for feed costs. **USDA** expects to issue approximately \$150 million to dairy producers for milk produced in February beginning Wednesday.

The department said the MILC payment trigger for February has been adjusted to \$17.33, yielding a MILC payment rate of \$1.5132. Payments for February will be roughly \$150 million.

MILC payments are allowed on up to 2.985 million lbs. of milk per farm a year, the equivalent of a 155-cow herd.

"Today, as a result of low dairy prices, we are distributing MILC payments to ensure that dairy producers have the financial assistance they need," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in a statement.

USDA said it will issue payments on milk produced in March in early May and MILC payments on milk produced in April in early June. Other payments will be made as warranted.

The 2008 farm law modified the MILC payment rate and the amount of a farm's milk eligible for payment, depending on when the milk is produced. (Reporting by Christopher Doering; Editing by Lisa Shumaker)

USA-AGRICULTURE/MILK|LANGEN|ABN|C|GRO|MTL|SOF

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103

News

Harkin aims to purge junk food from schools ; Mixed reactions greet the Iowa senator's latest push for more healthful meals and snacks.

Joseph Morton
WORLD-HERALD BUREAU
402 words
1 April 2009
Omaha World-Herald
Iowa;Nebraska;Sunrise;Metro
07A
English

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WASHINGTON -- Sen. **Tom Harkin**, D-Iowa, has embarked on the latest effort in his long-running quest to get candy bars and sugary pop out of the hands of America's schoolchildren

As chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, Harkin is guiding this year's re-authorization of federal child **nutrition** programs. He wants to include in the legislation new national **nutrition** standards that would cover all food items sold in schools, including those in vending machines, school stores and lunchroom a la carte lines

"The majority of our schools offer children ready access to heavily sweetened beverages, highly salted snacks, sugary and high- fat baked goods and candy," Harkin said Tuesday at a committee hearing on the issue

Harkin said junk food in schools harms children's health and undermines the billions of dollars taxpayers spend on nutritious school meals

His proposal continues to face resistance, however. Many schools rely on the money made from snack sales to support extracurricular activities

Reginald Felton, director of federal relations for the National School Boards Association, said school districts are under financial pressure to provide everything from clean and safe school environments to laptop computers for students

However, others say replacing junk food with healthy offerings doesn't necessarily mean less money for the schools

Tammy Yarmon, **nutrition** director for the Omaha Public Schools, said OPS schools saw a dip in sales after moving away from drinks with higher sugar in vending machines. But sales seem to have rebounded as students get accustomed to new offerings

Beverly Benes, director of the Nebraska Department of Education's **nutrition** services, said some schools in the state have replaced pop with bottled water without suffering a hit to their bottom lines

Sen. Mike **Johanns**, R-Neb., a member of the Agriculture Committee, expressed skepticism about Harkin's proposal. **Johanns** said the plan runs counter to the principle of local control of schools

He said he supports school districts working with suppliers to offer healthier snacks and drinks, but solving the problem of childhood obesity will require more than removing junk food from vending machines.

Contact the writer 202-662-7270, joe.morton@owh.com

Locator Map/1 31 states have laws addressing obesity prevention in children

Document OMHA000020090401e541000bd

Los Angeles Times

Main News; Metro Desk

Food stamp benefits go up 13.6%; The state's 2.5 million recipients will get an average monthly increase of \$41.

Molly Hennessy-Fiske and Michael Rothfeld

676 words

2 April 2009

Los Angeles Times

Home Edition

A-12

English

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California **food stamp** recipients will receive 13.6% more benefits thanks to the federal economic stimulus package, the state Department of Social Services announced Wednesday.

The increase, effective immediately, was included in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, approved by Congress and signed by President Obama in February.

John Wagner, the state social services director, said in a statement that the increase "will dramatically help families, while also boosting California's economy in ways that benefit grocers, food manufacturers and growers."

The average monthly **food stamp** benefit received by about 2.5 million Californians will increase from \$300 to \$341 per household. State **food stamp** rolls are expected to increase by 300,000 this year, officials said.

The federal stimulus package also provided \$22 million in administrative funding for the state **food stamp** program, and 10 million pounds of food for food banks and pantries that serve low-income Californians through the federal Emergency Food Assistance Program.

Earlier this week, in an effort to help unemployed middle-class workers who do not qualify for government aid, L.A. County Supervisor Gloria Molina proposed that the county pursue temporary state and federal waivers of eligibility requirements for cash aid, food stamps and housing benefits.

"As more and more people lose their jobs and search in vain for new ones in a shrinking job market, many families are finding themselves, often for the first time, with inadequate funds to pay their rent or mortgage, keep their utilities and provide food for their children," Molina said Tuesday, citing an article in The Times last week.

Molina noted that each month, **food stamp** applications are denied for more than 19,000 county residents, and 7,000 applicants are denied benefits under CalWorks, a welfare program for families.

Those numbers are a marked increase from last year. In February, the county denied about 18% more CalWorks applications than the same month last year. **Food stamp** denials were up 14%, general relief denials were up 10% and Medi-Cal denials were up 7%.

Social Services offices across the Southland have seen an increase in middle-class demand for aid.

"People don't realize the asset limitations. If you have a BMW, that's going to be more than the asset requirements," said Terry Lynn Fisher, a spokeswoman for the Orange County Social Services Agency. "People tend to become irate because they paid into the system and find they don't qualify."

Sayori Baldwin, deputy director of the Riverside County Department of Public Social Services, said it is denying about half of those who apply for CalWorks and food stamps, despite the fact that "individuals are in crisis more than what we've seen in the past."

"The face of the stereotypical welfare applicant is changing," said Steven Couchot, assistant to the director of San Bernardino County's Transitional Assistance Department. "Beyond the single mothers and struggling families living below the poverty line, we are now seeing recently unemployed professionals and small-business owners seeking assistance."

2 of 2

Those applying for food stamps included an unemployed veteran with a degree in engineering whose home was in foreclosure and who was caring for his elderly mother, who recently lost her home to foreclosure. With their combined unemployment and Social Security income, they were only eligible for \$33 in food stamps.

Molina's proposal, which supervisors will consider at Tuesday's meeting, would direct the county's chief executive, lobbyists and social services officials to pursue legislation or temporary waivers to relax the income and eligibility requirements for CalWorks, food stamps and housing assistance.

Food stamp eligibility requirements are issued by the federal government; CalWorks requirements are set by the state.

"It's getting a little more desperate for some families," Molina said. "And we have to raise these issues with Sacramento and Washington."

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DOW JONES

AP Associated Press

Federal government tells court it won't defend Bush-era cuts to spotted owl protection

By JEFF BARNARD
Associated Press Writer

148 words

1 April 2009

14:30

AP Broadcast

English

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GRANTS PASS, Ore. (AP) - The Department of the Interior has told a federal court that it will not defend the Bush administration's decision to cut back protections for the northern **spotted owl**.

The action could affect logging in western Oregon.

The department made the notification in a motion filed Tuesday in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C.

Interior Department lawyers said in the motion that the decision was based on an inspector general's report finding there was political interference in owl protections by a former deputy assistant interior secretary.

Withdrawal of the Bush administration measures on the **spotted owl** measures would make it difficult for the federal Bureau of Land Management to go ahead with plans to boost logging in western Oregon.

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Document APBTR00020090401e541000qu



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UPDATE 1-Record US soy exports in 09/10-USDA's Glauber

544 words
1 April 2009
14:22
Reuters News
English
(c) 2009 Reuters Limited

(Recasts, updates with export projections, further comments from Glauber)

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Reuters) - U.S. soybean exports are projected for a record 1.225 billion bushels in 2009/10, the Agriculture Department chief economist said on Wednesday in an analysis of the likely corn, wheat, soybean and cotton crops.

Chief economist Joe Glauber said this year's cotton crop would be 13.5 million bales, based on **USDA's** Prospective Plantings report released on Tuesday. He indicated a soybean crop of a record 3.2 billion bushels, corn of 12.2 billion bushels and wheat of 2.1 billion bushels.

In testimony prepared for a congressional hearing, Glauber said "U.S. soybean exports are projected to reach a record 1.225 billion bushels in 2009/10" and ending stocks would be 311 million bushels, well above the 210 million bushels forecast for 2008/09.

"Prices are projected to decline to \$8.50 per bushel, the lowest since 2006/07," said the statement. Increased production would mean a 7 percent increase in the U.S. soybean supply from 2008/09. Soybean crush will rise to 1.675 billion bushels.

USDA will make its first forecast of the wheat crop in May and of the corn, soybean and cotton crops in August.

Here are highlights of Glauber's comments on corn, wheat, cotton and livestock:

-- Corn: Output is projected up 1 percent from 12.1 billion bushels in 2008. Feed use declines 2 percent as livestock numbers fall, making more grains available for distillers.

"Rising mandates for **ethanol** use are expected to support corn demand and prices in 2009/10." Some 4.1 billion bushels of new crop corn will be needed for **ethanol**. Exports go up 9 percent in 2009/10. Ending stocks decline from 2008/09. Average farm-gate price of corn \$3.80 a bushel, down 30 cents from 2008/09.

-- Wheat: With smaller plantings, output will fall by 15 percent from the 2.5 billion bushels grown in 2008. Ending stocks will climb slightly from 2008/09. Exports are projected down 3 percent. Average farm-gate price \$5.10 a bushel, down \$1.70 from 2008/09, due to large global wheat supply.

-- Cotton: Harvest area is projected at 8 million acres, based on average abandonment of 9 percent. Projected yield 810 lbs per acre. Domestic mill use up marginally and exports down slightly in 2009/10, resulting in ending stocks of 5.9 million bales. Average farm-gate price 53 cents, up 8 percent from 2008/09.

-- Livestock: High feed prices and weaker demand due to recession will result in a 2 percent decline in meat production in 2009 and a 0.8 percent decline in milk output. Beef production down 1 percent, pork down 1-2 percent, broiler meat down 3 percent and turkey down 4 percent. Fed cattle will be \$6 per 100 lbs lower and hogs down \$1 in 2009. Turkeys would be 2 cents per lb lower and broilers up 3 cents per lb. (Reporting by **Charles Abbott**; Editing by David Gregorio)

USDA-PLANTINGS/ (UPDATE
1)|LANGEN|ABN|C|GRO|SOF|O|OIL|E|RBN|U|MTL|RNP|DNP|PCO|PCM|PEN

Document LBA0000020090401e5410025t

Biden visits eastern NC to talk up how stimulus will help rural America, announces grant

By GARY D. ROBERTSON

Associated Press Writer

627 words

1 April 2009

17:00

AP Newswire (Government Feed)

English

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FAISON, N.C. (AP) - About \$1.8 billion in federal stimulus funding was released Wednesday to help strengthen rural communities by supporting loan guarantees and loosening credit for small-town home buyers, Vice President Joe Biden said during a visit to rural North Carolina.

Biden joined Agriculture Secretary **Tom Vilsack** in a daylong tour of eastern North Carolina in the White House's latest effort to highlight the \$787 billion federal stimulus package. Biden, whom President Obama chose to oversee the enactment of the recovery program, said it will help rural communities not only survive the recession but thrive when the economy improves.

The newly released funding, included in the package's \$10.4 billion for rural housing projects, is expected to help about 15,000 families nationwide with loan guarantees and other home-buying needs in rural areas, he said.

The stimulus plan also includes about \$2 billion for community health centers, and approximately \$500 million has already been sent to clinics nationwide. North Carolina's 27 community health clinics, which provide low or no-cost health care to uninsured patients, will receive \$8.6 million.

During a tour of Goshen Medical Center in Faison, Biden said \$635,000 from the package will help the community health care clinic hire two physicians and two nurses to help it serve 5,000 more patients annually. About 41,000 people are seen annually at the clinic's 20 sites in five counties.

"All of you are getting a better reality for the people in this neighborhood," Biden said after announcing the grant in the center's waiting room. "Helping small towns like yours is essential for our nation's well-being, as well as it is to help big cities like Charlotte."

Biden and Vilsack later visited a volunteer fire department in Pikeville that will receive a \$50,000 grant and \$1 million loan to replace an aging station that is too small for its ladder trucks.

Vilsack said helping community health centers like Goshen Medical Center helps boost farming communities and create jobs.

"It also provides an opportunity for this community to market itself as a place where economic development can take place," Vilsack, the former governor of Iowa, said during his visit to the clinic. "You have a health care facility and you have quality health care."

More than half of the patients at Goshen's clinic in Faison speak Spanish, said medical office assistant Nellie Hall told Biden. She said that reflects the importance of Hispanics in the community's farming industry.

"If we bring people here to work to provide us with food that we can put on our tables in America, then we are morally obligated take care of those people while they're working here for us," said Dr. Greg Bounds, the center's chief executive officer.

Biden said he visited eastern North Carolina because he and Obama understand residents are struggling. North Carolina's unemployment rate hit 10.7 percent last month -- the highest rate on record and the fourth highest in the nation.

During the clinic tour, Biden and Vilsack visited with doctors and nurses along with patients in a smaller waiting room. Biden put out his hand to one couple and joked: "The last thing you need when you come to the doctor is to see the vice president."

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Before leaving the state, Biden made an unscheduled visit to a fitness center on Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Greensboro. He shook hands and visited with airmen who were going through mandatory physical training, and spoke with children attending an after-school program for military families.

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Document APGOV00020090401e54100152

Jacksonville Daily News

Vice President Biden touts stimulus benefits in Eastern North Carolina

107

By Sarah Campbell

April 1, 2009 - 8:58PM

PIKEVILLE - Perseverance was the theme Tuesday as Vice President Joe Biden made stops in two eastern North Carolina communities.

"Every single day I see something new that provides hope," Biden said. "Hope that we are not only going to survive this recession, but hope that the American people ... will come out better off than they were before."

Biden and Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack highlighted the effects the economic stimulus will have on small towns during visits to Faison's Goshen Medical Center and Pikeville's Pleasant Grove Volunteer Fire Department.

"(Biden) is spending his day in rural America to make sure that you understand and appreciate how much he values you ...," Vilsack said. "The Obama/Biden administration is very sensitive to the concerns and needs, hopes and aspirations of those who live in rural communities."

Rural communities across the country will be receiving \$20 billion in stimulus funding to improve economic opportunities and quality of life.

"We understand that the health of small towns, like Pikeville, is essential for the nation's well-being," Biden said.

Pikeville will be receiving recovery funds to build a new four-bay firehouse, which will have the capacity to house as many as eight vehicles.

"Right now, (the firehouse) is too small," Willie Person, assistant chief of Pikeville Pleasant Grove Volunteer Fire Department said. "(These funds) will allow us to grow ... so that we can keep up with the times and our growing district."

On Tuesday, Biden also announced that the USDA will be offering \$10.4 billion in recovery funds for single family housing, \$322 million of which will be heading to N.C. to invest in 875 loans.

"We are doing this because we realized credit is so tight," Biden said. "Even creditworthy people are having trouble."

Despite the ailing economy, Biden echoed the administration's certainty in a brighter tomorrow.

"We will recover," he said. "This is about more than just recovery; it's about making sure we build a firm foundation to the 21st century where the middle class is raised up."

The culmination of Biden's nearly 30-minute speech resonated the resiliency of the American people. "We're going to get this done," he said. "We've got a real shot and it starts right here in this firehouse."

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Winston-Salem Journal

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Biden touts aid in rural N.C.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FAISON

Vice President Joe Biden outlined ways yesterday that the federal stimulus package will help rural North Carolina thrive once the economy recovers during his visit to Faison and Pikeville.

Biden announced that federal officials will distribute \$1.8 billion in loan guarantees for nearly 10,000 rural families to buy houses nationwide. The state will receive \$322.9 million as part of that program.

Biden visited Eastern North Carolina with Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack in the White House's latest effort to highlight the \$787 billion federal stimulus package. The two communities are in, respectively, Duplin and Wayne counties, southeast of Raleigh.

Biden, whom President Obama chose to oversee the enactment of the recovery program, focused on how the money will help improve health care and public safety in rural communities.

During a tour of Goshen Medical Center in Faison, Biden said that \$635,000 from the package will help the community health-care clinic hire two physicians and two nurses to serve 5,000 more patients a year. The clinic now sees about 41,000 people annually at 20 sites in five counties.

"All of you are getting a better reality for the people in this neighborhood," Biden said in announcing the grant in the center's waiting room. "Helping small towns like yours is essential for our nation's well-being, as well as it is to help big cities like Charlotte."

The stimulus includes about \$2 billion for community-health centers, and nearly \$500 million has been pledged to clinics nationwide. North Carolina's 27 community health clinics, which provide low- or no-cost health care to uninsured patients, will get \$8.6 million.

In Northwest North Carolina, the West Caldwell Health Council Inc. has received \$100,000 in stimulus money that it will use to hire a health educator, said Valerie McRary, the council's chief executive officer. The educator will provide health information to uninsured people and patients with such chronic illnesses as diabetes.

The council runs the Collettsville Medical Center in Collettsville and the Happy Valley Medical Center in Patterson, both rural health clinics in Caldwell County. Their patients include people who live in Wilkes, Watauga and Alexander counties.

Biden and Vilsack also went to the Pleasant Grove Volunteer Fire Department in Pikeville, which is getting money to replace an aging station.

In Forsyth County, the Lewisville Volunteer Fire Department plans to apply this summer for stimulus money to build a second fire station, Chief Scott Alderman said. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has \$210 million in stimulus money for building and renovating fire stations nationwide.

The fire department has bought five acres at the corner of Shallowford and Williams Roads near the West Bend Vineyard for the station, Alderman said.

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The Winston-Salem Fire Department also has plans to apply for stimulus money to renovate two stations near the city's outskirts and replace some fire trucks, Chief Antony Farmer said.

"All of those things are on our radar," Farmer said.

■ *Journal reporter John Hinton contributed to this article.*

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DOW JONES

Oklahoma to receive \$126 million in guaranteed housing loans

By Jim Myers, Tulsa World, Okla.
McClatchy-Tribune Regional News
318 words
1 April 2009
Tulsa World (MCT)
English
Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Apr. 1--WASHINGTON -- Oklahoma will receive \$126 million in guaranteed housing loans to help spur economic opportunities and home ownership in rural communities, the Obama administration announced Wednesday.

Part of a \$10 billion program at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the funds were included in Obama's stimulus package.

"The Recovery Act is touching every corner of America, from Main streets to cul-de-sacs to county roads," Vice President Joe Biden said.

"With these tough economic times, homeownership is a goal that's out of reach for many people, but the Recovery Act is changing that," he said.

Joining Biden in the announcement in North Carolina was U.S. Agriculture Secretary **Tom Vilsack**.

"President Obama recognizes that people in rural communities deserve a safe and secure place to raise their families," Vilsack said. "The funds released today will immediately create job opportunities and make the dream of homeownership a reality for thousands of people in rural America."

According to their announcement, stimulus funds initially will provide 15,000 rural families with \$1.76 billion in loan guarantees for homeownership financing, creating or saving approximately 7,500 jobs.

Once all Recovery Act funding for rural housing is released, with \$7 billion going directly to states and another \$3 billion held in reserve for higher need areas, the administration estimated that 42,500 jobs will be created or saved.

USDA's housing programs are designed to improve the quality of life for rural Americans by ensuring that they

have access to safe, well-built, affordable homes.

They finance new or improved housing for very low- to moderate-income families and individuals in rural areas.

To see more of the Tulsa World, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.tulsaworld.com>.

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REUTERS

109

Nominee for No. 2 USDA job defends organic past

By Christopher Doering
406 words
1 April 2009
18:02
Reuters News
English
(c) 2009 Reuters Limited

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Reuters) - The Obama administration's nominee for the U.S. Agriculture Department's No. 2 job on Wednesday defended her work on organic food from Senate critics who questioned whether she could work with other farmers.

"I see (deputy secretary) as a great opportunity to represent all kinds of agriculture. Organic is a small slice of the pie," said Kathleen Merrigan, tapped for deputy secretary of agriculture. "I've always been a provocateur. That's part of my personality," she added.

During a confirmation hearing before the Senate Agriculture Committee, Merrigan defended her record and said she has done work on a wide-range of agricultural issues.

Republican lawmakers expressed concern that Merrigan, a Clinton administration official who helped develop USDA rules on what can be sold as organic food, has been too closely associated with organic farming.

"I do have some concerns that in promoting your passion for organic production and sustainable agriculture that you tear down other types of agricultural production for those with different points of view," said Sen. Saxby Chambliss, the leading Republican on the Senate Agriculture Committee, who touted the benefits of production agriculture.

"Please keep a special place in your heart for organic production ... but also other types of productions which give farmers more options."

As a Senate aide, Merrigan also worked on the 1990 law that recognized organic farming.

The Agriculture Committee held a confirmation hearing on Wednesday for Merrigan and Jim Miller, who would run the U.S. farm subsidy program, as well as Joe Leonard to be assistant agriculture secretary for civil rights.

Sen. Tom Harkin, an Iowa Democrat, said after the hearing he and Chambliss planned to allow the nominees to go to the full Senate for approval without a committee vote. He expected the vote would occur by late Thursday.

If approved, they would be the first high-level Obama nominees to join Secretary **Tom Vilsack** at USDA. The nominations were not expected to face opposition.

The nomination of Dallas Tonsager, picked as the top rural development official at the USDA, was delayed by a "timing" issue, but a spokesman said the committee hoped to move forward quickly on his appointment.

(Reporting by Christopher Doering; Editing by David Gregorio)

AGRICULTURE-USA/NOMINEES|LANGEN|MN|ABN|E|RBN|U|G|C|GRO|SOF|MTL|RNP|DNP|PGE|PCO

Document LBA0000020090401e541002e0

CongressDaily **AM**

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AGRICULTURE

USDA Nominees Get Hearing, May Go Straight To Floor

109

Thursday, April 2, 2009
by Jerry Hagstrom

Following a confirmation hearing Wednesday on President Obama's nominees for three key posts at USDA, Senate Agriculture Chairman **Tom Harkin** said he will try to get the nominations through the Senate before Congress leaves this week for recess.

Harkin said he would ask the Senate to discharge the committee from voting on the nominations so he can take them straight to the Senate floor. He said Senate Agriculture ranking member **Saxby Chambliss** has agreed to that approach.

The nominees are Kathleen Merrigan, a Tufts University professor and former aide to Sen. **Patrick Leahy**, D-Vt., to be deputy Agriculture secretary; James Miller, the chief of staff at the National Farmers Union and a former aide to Senate Budget Chairman **Kent Conrad**, to be Agriculture undersecretary for farm and foreign agricultural services; and Joe Leonard Jr., an aide to Rep. Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, D-Mich., and former executive director of the Congressional Black Caucus, to be Agriculture assistant secretary for civil rights.

The hearing went smoothly for the nominees, but Chambliss told Merrigan, the author of many academic articles, that he was concerned that "in promoting your passion for organic production and sustainable agriculture, you tear down other types of agriculture with different points of view."

Chambliss told Merrigan that her job at USDA "won't be to focus on your personal interests or to promote one type of agriculture at the expense of another," but to help run the entire department.

Merrigan, who helped write the USDA organic program when she worked for Leahy, responded that she recognizes organic agriculture is only a "small slice of the pie, 2 to 3 percent" of U.S. agriculture.

Of her writings, Merrigan said, "I've always been a provocateur. That's part of my personality." But she added that when she was administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service in the Clinton administration, she worked on many conventional USDA agriculture programs, including milk marketing orders, check-offs and commodity purchases for feeding programs.

Miller, who will supervise crop subsidies and export and crop insurance programs, promised to "meet the intent of Congress" by implementing the permanent disaster program quickly. Agriculture Secretary Vilsack said Tuesday he does not expect to make payments under that program until 2010 because his staff is finding it difficult to use USDA's aged computer system.

ADVERTISEMENT

UPDATE 1-US needs another year to test higher ethanol blend

By Tom Doggett
521 words
1 April 2009
12:25
Reuters News
English
(c) 2009 Reuters Limited

(Adds **ethanol** blend wall may be reached in 2013, concerns from livestock operators)

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Reuters) - The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said on Wednesday it will take another year to complete government testing on whether higher levels of **ethanol** can be blended into gasoline without harming engines.

Ethanol is now approved to make up 10 percent of gasoline in cars and trucks. Producers are pushing the government to allow higher **ethanol** blend levels, as more **ethanol** will be required each year under federal law.

Congress required 9 billion gallons of **ethanol** and other biofuels to be blended into gasoline last year. The amount will rise annually toward 36 billion gallons a year in 2022.

However, the Energy Department estimates that as early as 2013, at the 10 percent blend rate, the amount of **ethanol** required to be produced would exceed the amount the U.S. vehicle fleet could consume. The so-called 10 percent blend wall could be reached a year earlier if a weak economy further reduces gasoline demand.

Margo Oge, Director of the EPA's Office of Transportation and Air Quality, told a Senate panel the agency is working with the Energy Department to test the impact of higher **ethanol** levels and hopes to finish "over the course of the next year."

In a statement to a Senate Clean Air and Nuclear Safety Subcommittee hearing, Oge said the tests should provide "emissions and durability data to support a decision on the appropriate use, if any, of higher blends of **ethanol** in gasoline vehicles and engines."

Oge noted that the EPA received a petition last month from Growth Energy and 52 **ethanol** manufacturers to allow gasoline to contain up to 15 percent of **ethanol** by volume.

Oge said the agency "will soon" publish the proposal and seek public comment. She said EPA has 270 days to act on the request, from March 6 when it was received.

The head of the trade group representing U.S. oil refiners that make gasoline told the Senate panel it opposed any legislation or regulations approving higher **ethanol** blends until "unbiased and comprehensive" testing is complete.

"There has not been sufficient testing of motor vehicle and nonroad equipment engines to justify" higher **ethanol** blends in gasoline, said Charles Drevna, President of the National Petrochemical and Refiners Association.

Livestock operators complain that more **ethanol** production would raise their animal feed costs because **ethanol** made in the United States is refined mostly from corn.

Sen. Tom Carper, who chairs the subcommittee, questioned whether the U.S. market can absorb increased **ethanol** supplies each year now that gasoline demand has declined due to a weak economy and more fuel-efficient vehicles on the road.

"As (gasoline) consumption decreases our biofuels standard increases," he said. "Are we moving too fast for our infrastructure and engines to handle the biofuels safely?" (Reporting by Tom Doggett; editing by Jim Marshall)

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DOW JONES

log 2

Chicago Tribune

News

Ethanol fight gets revved up; Critics say increasing percentage of additive can cause equipment to malfunction and destroy engines

By Joshua Boak, TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

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English

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Picture a chain saw calmly idling. But then its blade suddenly starts spinning on its own, as if someone had goosed the throttle.

The power equipment industry warns that such a scenario could happen if the federal government agrees to increase the percentage of **ethanol** mixed into gasoline. Upping the **ethanol** content would add more oxygen to the fuel, causing the engine to idle at a higher speed and literally fooling the chain saw into acting as though its clutch were engaged.

"For us, it's principally a safety issue," said Kris Kiser, executive vice president of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute. "We make bladed and clutch equipment that is inherently dangerous."

Wednesday a coalition backed by the power equipment, petroleum, boating and automobile industries voiced concerns to the Senate Clean Air and Nuclear Safety subcommittee that a higher **ethanol** mix could destroy engines and void warranties on vehicles designed for a 10 percent **ethanol** blend.

"We must ensure that these blends are safe for consumers [and] do not harm gasoline-powered engines," Charles Drevna, president of the National Petrochemical & Refiners Association, said on behalf of the coalition.

The subcommittee is reviewing the oversight of biofuels by the Environmental Protection Agency, which primarily considers automobile emissions and not consumer safety when approving fuel standards. Growth Energy, an **ethanol**-backed interest group, asked the EPA in March to increase the **ethanol** blend to 15 percent. Because the agency has until December to examine the issue, Growth Energy has asked that the blend temporarily be raised to 12 or 13 percent.

Last month, Agriculture Department Secretary Tom Vilsack called on the EPA to adopt the temporary increase. President Barack Obama's stimulus package raised the tax credit gas stations would receive for installing pumps for flex-fuel vehicles, which can run on gasoline or an 85 percent **ethanol** mixture.

Fears of damaged motors are overblown, contend **ethanol** producers. "Engines can compensate for differences in fuel," said Michael Harrigan, a former Ford Motor Co. engineer who consults for Growth Energy.

Ethanol producers also note that engine settings can be adjusted for higher **ethanol** blends, and consumers can still buy gasoline with lower **ethanol** content.

So far, the long-term consequences of motors running on a higher **ethanol** blend is not known. The National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Colorado has measured only the short-term effects of multiple **ethanol** blends in the engines of cars and leaf blowers, among other power equipment.

"Both sides are a bit premature," said Keith Knoll, the study's senior project leader at the National Renewable Energy Lab. "This is part of a much larger study that needs to be finished before any broad sweeping conclusions are drawn."

The study is to be completed in 2010.

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Chain saws were not part of the study, although the clutch engagement problem was seen when testing higher **ethanol** blends in grass trimmers. The engine temperature in power equipment increased with greater **ethanol** blends and engine temperatures in nearly half of the vehicles tested increased with higher blends. Opponents say the higher temperatures could wear engines prematurely. Tailpipe emissions were largely unaffected by adding more **ethanol** to gasoline, the study showed.

Economic pressures led **ethanol** producers to seek a higher blend, which could improve demand for the corn-based fuel and possibly resurrect an industry that has shut down nearly 20 percent of its refinery capacity.

The Senate subcommittee hearings were ostensibly about EPA oversight of the renewable fuels standard, which sets annual production targets that **ethanol** refiners are supposed to meet.

If the levels are unchanged, refiners could fall 1.6 billion gallons short of the 12.3 billion gallons they are supposed to produce next year, according to research by Martha Schlicher, vice president of Illinois River Energy, an **ethanol** refiner in Rochelle, Ill. A mandate for more **ethanol** production and a fixed limit on how much **ethanol** can be mixed with gasoline is a "Catch-22," Schlicher said.

Ford is the lone automaker to endorse increasing the blend, according to a February letter the company sent Poet LLC, a South Dakota **ethanol** refinery firm.

Other automakers worry that the higher blend could void warranties and corrode engines, said Charles Territo, a spokesman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, whose members include General Motors, Chrysler, Toyota and Volkswagen. "What's at stake here is the operation of more than 240 million vehicles," Territo said.

BUSINESS

Photo(s) Photo: With a higher **ethanol** mix, the blade of an idling chain saw could suddenly spin on its own as if someone had goosed the throttle, say opponents of the fuel change. ANGELA KERSHNER/MORNING NEWS PHOTO

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BUSINESS

Pacific Ethanol in cash crunch; SEC FILING SAYS FUNDS MIGHT NOT LAST PAST APRIL 30

Dale Kasler dkasler@sacbee.com

440 words

1 April 2009

The Sacramento Bee

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English

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Pacific **Ethanol** Inc. is running out of gas.

The troubled Sacramento **ethanol** producer said Tuesday that its cash could run out in a month. Once among the fastest-growing **ethanol** producers, the company said in a Securities and Exchange Commission filing that there's "substantial doubt" that it can continue beyond April 30 unless it can renegotiate its debts or find new sources of cash.

It said it might have to file for bankruptcy protection.

Company officials couldn't be reached for comment.

Pacific **Ethanol** is in default on \$250 million in loans. Although its creditors agreed once again Tuesday not to take legal action on the defaults, the agreement expires April 30. As it is, the company has only \$4 million in cash and \$4.7 million in available credit, and probably can't keep going beyond that date.

As part of the latest agreement, Pacific **Ethanol** revealed that it had to borrow \$2 million from its chairman, former California Secretary of State Bill Jones, and President and Chief Executive Neil Koehler.

The company also disclosed heavy fourth-quarter losses: \$33.9 million, or 61 cents a share. That compared with a loss of \$14.7 million, or 39 cents a share, a year earlier.

Sales grew 23 percent to \$160.4 million. But Pacific **Ethanol**, like its competitors, has been squeezed by shrinking margins as **ethanol** prices failed to keep up with the rising cost of corn, the main ingredient used in making the fuel additive.

With corn at \$5 a bushel and **ethanol** at \$1.55 a gallon, "the spread between **ethanol** and corn is really too narrow to make money," said Joel Karlin, a commodities analyst at Western Milling in Goshen in Tulare County.

In addition, the wholesale price of gas has fallen below that of **ethanol**, Karlin said. As a result, refiners have no incentive to use more **ethanol** beyond the mandated minimums. That curbs demand.

Last fall one of the nation's biggest **ethanol** makers, VeraSun Energy of Sioux Falls, S.D., filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

After a period of rapid growth in which it built plants in three states, Pacific **Ethanol** has been furiously downsizing. It suspended production at three of its plants in recent months and is operating at one-quarter capacity.

Pacific **Ethanol** stock closed at 33 cents a share Tuesday, unchanged, on the Nasdaq market.

Call The Bee's Dale Kasler, (916) 321-1066. Read his blog on the economy, Home Front, at www.sacbee.com/blogs.

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HEALTH

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FDA Tells Enzi It Won't Meet Latest Food Registry Deadline

Thursday, April 2, 2009
by Anna Edney

Despite a massive and deadly salmonella outbreak in peanuts and now recalls of pistachios for the same foodborne pathogen, FDA is again delaying a registry meant to be up and running last summer that would track contaminated foods and serve as an early warning system.

FDA Acting Assistant Commissioner for Legislation Stephen Mason wrote Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions ranking member **Michael Enzi** Tuesday informing the senator the agency would miss the new spring deadline it hoped to meet.

"However, barring unforeseen events, system development for the registry should be completed within 2009," Mason wrote. FDA and NIH will then conduct another month of testing once the registry is complete before putting it up live.

Enzi wrote FDA last month, asking the agency to explain its progress on the registry.

"American families have suffered the terrible health consequences of foodborne illness while FDA drags its feet on enforcing existing food safety laws," Enzi wrote. "Had the registry and reporting requirements been in effect, these recalls could have proceeded more rapidly and fewer Americans would have become sick from contaminated food."

FDA just warned consumers about the salmonella outbreak in pistachios this week. The recent outbreak in peanuts led to nine deaths and nearly 700 illnesses.

Enzi asked for the update given that FDA has since asked for new food safety powers since Congress signed the registry into law.

House Energy and Commerce Democratic Reps. **John Dingell** and **Bart Stupak**, both of Michigan, and **Frank Pallone** of New Jersey, have sought to give FDA additional resources and authority to police regulated products. Policy experts expect the food safety provisions to be broken off and passed on their own before lawmakers consider the drug, medical device and cosmetic provisions.

Congress required the food registry and outlined reporting requirements in a 2007 law that set user fee levels for drugs and medical devices and revamped FDA's drug safety efforts, and, to a lesser extent, the agency's food safety activities.

Tony Corbo, a lobbyist for the group Food & Water Watch, said he is concerned FDA is stretched too thin to focus on creating the registry.

"I have a feeling, the fact they've had all these recalls and people are running all over the place, they've diverted their attention from it," Corbo said.

Without the electronic registry, food companies and federal, state and local health officials report incidents to a fragmented system operated through district FDA offices.

How can we squeeze
more food from a

RAINDROP?

FDA says the move to the electronic registry required by law is postponed because integrating the requirements with an electronic reporting system for reporting adverse medical events already under development in collaboration with the National Institutes of Health has taken longer the expected. Much like food, reporting on adverse reactions to pharmaceuticals and medical devices is spread across several different databases, some electronic, some paper-based.

FDA and NIH are working to integrate all the databases into one dubbed MedWatch Plus, where it would house the food registry as well. Mason wrote that combining adverse events on all FDA-regulated products into a single database would prove more cost-effective and user friendly.

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UPDATE 1-U.S. pistachio recall widens on salmonella fear

416 words
1 April 2009
11:54
Reuters News
English
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* More companies recall pistachio products

* Pistachio group testing shipments (Adds details on John B. Sanfilippo and Georgia Nut Co)

By Martinne Geller

NEW YORK, April 1 (Reuters) - The U.S. recall of pistachio nuts due to potential **salmonella** contamination widened on Wednesday as more snack makers and retailers removed products from store shelves as a precaution.

PepsiCo Inc's North American snack division Frito-Lay recalled its unshelled pistachios in 1.75 ounce packages with sell-by dates between July 14, 2009 and Dec. 29, 2009. The company said it had not received any reports of illness related to the product, but was recalling it as a precaution.

Frito-Lay also recalled its bagged pistachios in Canada, where they are sold under the Munchies brand. The recalled Munchies nuts have sell-by dates between Aug. 4, 2009 and Dec. 15, 2009.

Frito-Lay and its Canadian unit said their pistachios were supplied by Setton Pistachio of Terra Bella Inc, the California grower and processor that issued a recall on Tuesday of selected lots of pistachios due to **salmonella**.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration said on Tuesday that it was conducting genetic testing of samples to see if there was a link between pistachios and several illnesses reported by consumers.

The Western Pistachio Association said on Wednesday that its growers and processors were working to ensure the safety of their inventories and that they would keep testing shipments.

As a precaution, snack maker John B. Sanfilippo & Son Inc recalled bulk packaged and small packages of unshelled pistachios under its Fisher and Flavor Tree brands. The Flavor Tree nuts were sold exclusively at Whole Foods Market Inc stores.

Ciao Bella Gelato said it recalled 3.5 ounce cups of its pistachio gelato since they contain diced pistachios supplied by Setton.

The Georgia Nut Co recalled several products, including bulk mixed nuts with shelled pistachios, from several of its stores and from Dominick's Finer Foods stores in the Chicago area.

Grocery chain Kroger Co widened the recall of its Private Selection shelled pistachios on Tuesday, adding other "sell by" dates.

Separately, Kroger recalled 32-ounce jars of "Kroger Lite Mayo" sold in Indiana, Kentucky and Ohio because they may be contaminated with **salmonella**. (Additional reporting by Jessica Wohl in Chicago, editing by Gerald E. McCormick, Toni Reinhold)

PISTACHIOS/RECALL (UPDATE 1)|LANGEN|AFA|CSA|LBY|RWSA|RWS|REULB|GNS|ABX|BNX|SXNA

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Salmonella outbreaks lead to food-safety changes

By Elizabeth Weise, USA TODAY

Advertisement

Nuts. Americans love them. They are a heart-healthy staple of recipes, diet plans, kids' lunches and snack foods.

They have also been at the center of major salmonella outbreaks in recent years. The government and the food industry are working overtime to beef up guidelines on what companies need to do to keep consumers safe.

FDA WEBSITE: Complete lists of food recalls

The salmonella outbreak in peanut products has sickened 691 and may have contributed to the deaths of nine in 46 states. While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says the last illness was reported on Feb. 24, products are still being sporadically recalled.

A salmonella outbreak in 2004 linked to raw almonds made dozens sick and resulted in the recall of 13 million pounds of almonds. Because of that, the Department of Agriculture has mandated that all almonds be pasteurized to kill salmonella.

And this week, 2 million pounds of pistachios were recalled because of concerns about contamination. Pistachios were a surprise because they historically have not been considered vulnerable to bacterial contamination, says Richard Matoian of the Western Pistachio Association in Fresno.

The repeated outbreaks and recalls may bring about a new day in the oversight of nut production. For the peanut industry, "This is a wake-up call," says Emory Murphy, the Georgia Peanut Commission's assistant executive director.

President Obama, who has publicly expressed concern about the safety of the peanut butter his 7-year-old daughter, Sasha, eats, has made it clear that he sees food safety as a major concern. "No parent should have to worry that their child is going to get sick from their lunch," he said in the March 14 address in which he announced the creation of the Food Safety Working Group, an interagency effort to help overhaul the oversight system.

"There's enormous public pressure placed on food processors and manufacturers to ensure farm-to-fork integrity," says Arvin Maskin, a product-liability lawyer at Weil Gotshal & Manges in New York.

Even consumer advocates who say food producers have avoided making safety a priority are seeing a change. "I think that resistance is crumbling in the wake of repeated recalls, which have cost them so much money and so much in the way of consumer confidence," says Sarah Klein, a staff attorney at the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) in Washington, D.C.

'Guidance' on salmonella

After the outbreak in peanut products, the Food and Drug Administration released on March 9 its first "guidance" on how to deal with the risk of salmonella contamination in foods that include peanuts. The agency has put food producers on notice that it expects an elimination of virtually all salmonella bacteria in peanut products.

The contamination was traced to the Peanut Corp. of America, which supplied wholesale peanut butter to institutions such as schools and nursing homes, and peanut paste to retail food manufacturers for use as an ingredient in ice cream, cookies, candy and other foods. FDA inspectors reported that PCA's plant in Blakely, Ga., was dirty and infested by rodents.

Guidance designed to prevent such conditions is not legally binding, but it proclaims the FDA's views on the actions necessary to bring a

troubled industry in line with food-safety laws. Food producers can choose to meet their legal obligations in ways not recommended by the guidance, but they run the risk of running afoul of FDA inspectors on the lookout for processors "not paying attention to what FDA wants to see in a well-run plant," says Michael Kashtock, a food-safety scientist at FDA's Division of Plant and Dairy Food Safety in College Park, Md.

The agency wants a guaranteed "kill step" to destroy salmonella in dry roasted peanuts, the type most used in cookies, candy and peanut crackers. That step generally requires heating to an excess of 300 degrees for more than 15 minutes, Kashtock says.

More important, the FDA now expects producers to "validate" all such processes, proving that the kill step works. On any given roasting machine, multiple tests will have to be done on products going in and coming out of ovens and roasters.

It will mean using carefully calibrated temperature gauges to check for cold spots in the ovens. It can even mean doing infrared imaging of cookies and other baked goods to make sure they reach the proper interior temperature to kill salmonella, says Rick Falkenberg, a microbiologist at Food Safety and Process Technology, a Turlock, Calif.-based company that is a process authority for manufacturers.

"These studies are difficult to do, and they're expensive," says Paul Gerhardt, a microbiologist at the National Food Laboratory in Livermore, Calif.

Very expensive. A large, complicated piece of roasting equipment could cost \$20,000, \$30,000 or even \$50,000 to validate, Gerhardt says.

It's a good investment, says Bill Marler, a prominent Seattle-based food-safety lawyer who has already filed eight lawsuits against PCA. "You always worry that you'll spend \$2,000 more a month to do testing, but if that \$2,000 can save me from going bankrupt or losing hundreds of millions of dollars, it's a cheap investment."

He has a point. The Georgia Peanut Commission says the outbreak may cost peanut producers \$1 billion in lost production and sales. Kellogg, which makes Keebler and Austin peanut butter crackers, both of which were recalled, says it has lost \$70 million because of the outbreak.

The FDA is not the only one looking for changes.

On Feb. 4, the Grocery Manufacturers Association released guidelines on how companies can control salmonella in low-moisture foods, with peanuts being one of the main foods targeted.

Later that month, the American Peanut Council, an industry group, issued an outline of good manufacturing practices. Recommendations include continuous microbiological testing of products and stringent pest control.

Will these measures be enough?

When a guidance is related to safety, "Companies usually follow it or something more stringent," says Scott Openshaw of the Grocery Manufacturers Association.

CSPI's Klein doesn't buy it. "This is crisis management in action," she says. "These guidances are voluntary. What they're banking on is that everybody in the industry is going to do the right thing, and unfortunately, if the Peanut Corp. of America has taught us nothing else, it's that not everyone is going to do the right thing."

An industry on notice

This outbreak has put the entire food industry on notice that it must ensure not only the safety of the food it produces, but the ingredients it buys. PCA handled only an estimated 2.5% of all U.S. peanuts, says Patrick Archer of the peanut council. But because of the enormous popularity of peanut products, "Even a small company like that supplied (ingredients to) a lot of companies." In fact, the FDA reports that almost 4,000 peanut products have been recalled.

That's something that the FDA action hammers home.

"The guidance is really directed to the people who make the ice cream, the cookies, the candy bars," Kashtock says. Either companies have to mitigate the risk by testing the ingredients they buy, or ensure that their supplier did.

Requiring everyone along the production process to make sure the ingredients they're using are safe seems to work. It's how the pistachio contamination was discovered.

A small Skokie, Ill., firm called the Georgia Nut Co. bought pistachios from Setton Pistachio of Terra Bella, Calif., and then, as part of its routine food-safety efforts, had them tested for salmonella.

"We have a pretty rigorous product-testing regime," spokesman Joshua Robbins says. The test came back positive for salmonella, and the company issued a recall on March 25 for the nuts it had sent to a small number of Chicago-area stores.

It also informed Kraft Foods, for which it produced and packaged Nantucket Blend Trail Mix under the Back to Nature Foods label. Kraft issued a recall for the trail mix, which contains pistachios, the same day.

Kraft has also recalled all Planters products containing pistachios, and Frito-Lay has recalled its in-shell pistachios. The Kroger supermarket chain of Cincinnati has recalled its Private Selection Shelled Pistachios.

Setton Pistachio sold its pistachios in 1,000- and 2,000-pound containers to about 30 wholesalers. FDA officials say they expect the pistachio recall to become larger as makers of pistachio-containing products such as ice cream, candy and trail mix realize that their foods contain Setton pistachios.

A low-risk product

Pistachios have three distinct processing steps that have historically made them a very low-risk product when it came to bacterial contamination, says Matoian of the Western Pistachio Association.

First, pistachios are harvested by large machines that shake the tree, dropping the nuts into hoppers. Nuts that fall on the ground where they might be contaminated are not harvested, he says.

Then they're brought to a processing facility where they're husked and washed, generally in a very diluted chlorine bath to both clean them and kill contaminants. From there, they go through an initial drying process at 160 degrees to 200 degrees for four to six hours, Matoian says.

After that, they're cooled and stored until they're roasted at 250 degrees to 350 degrees for 15 minutes to a few hours, depending on the processor.

It's unlikely salmonella could survive that process, he says.

While it's not yet known how Setton's nuts were tainted, company officials say they believe the processed nuts may have come in contact with raw pistachios that carried the bacteria.

Several industry experts say Setton Pistachio — the second-largest pistachio processor in the nation — is regarded as an excellent production facility.

"They're a very well-run plant," says Louise Ferguson, a pistachio researcher at the University of California-Davis. "We even toured them recently for a short course" on pistachio production.

Cleaning up plants isn't rocket science, attorney Marler says.

"In many respects, it's just common sense," he says. "You're taking a deep breath and thinking about where all the possible safety flaws in your system are and then how to deal with them."

Companies are going to have to up their game and cultivate "a culture of risk avoidance," Maskin says. They can't rely on the government or third-party auditors to ensure their products are safe. "In the food-safety arena, you have to consider the magnitude of the potential harm."

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/money/industries/food/2009-04-01-nuts-salmonella-food-safety_N.htm

☐ Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

116

192

NEWS

Gaps in food safety Pistachio scare points to FDA's lack of authority to ensure necessary inspections, power to declare recall

BY DELTHIA RICKS

545 words

2 April 2009

Newsday

ALL EDITIONS

A05

English

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Contaminated pistachios, the latest in a string of **salmonella** scares, have re-focused a spotlight on gaps in **food safety**, illuminating how the U.S. Food and Drug Administration lacks the power to declare a recall and the money to inspect food processors more frequently.

Consumer groups have been lobbying for changes in **food safety** laws that would grant more power to the FDA and pump up its workforce, allowing annual inspections of food processing plants - and the ability to declare recalls when problems are found.

A study by Consumers Union in Yonkers last year found federal inspectors actually inspect each of the nation's 65,520 domestic food processing facilities on average once a decade.

A spokeswoman for Setton Pistachio of Terra Bella Inc., in California, the company involved in a recall of at least 2 million pounds of pistachios because of potential **salmonella** contamination, could not say yesterday when the FDA last inspected the company's facility. The firm is an affiliate of Setton International Foods Inc. in Commack.

Currently, when the FDA finds serious contamination it must inform the operation and then encourage owners to recall products voluntarily.

"They basically have to jawbone them into it," said Jean Halloran, director of **food safety** for Consumers Union. "Most of the time, companies capitulate, but there is always a bit of negotiation involved and some companies dig their heels."

The FDA earlier this week described Setton as cooperative. FDA spokesman Michael Herndon said yesterday federal regulators are awaiting environmental and sample testing results from its California facility.

Several proposals are pending in Congress that would reform and modernize the FDA, including a bill introduced by Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.) that would empower the agency to declare a recall. The measure would also increase its workforce, allowing the agency to conduct annual site inspections.

Consumers such as Karen Grinberg, of East Setauket, say recalls are frightening and seem to be occurring more frequently. She had purchased a bag of pistachios on Sunday and learned after eating 10 to 15 nuts from a 16-ounce bag that they were part of the recall.

"I looked on the bag and it said Setton Farms," said Grinberg, adding she returned the nuts to the Port Jefferson grocery store where she purchased them. "My 11-year-old daughter kept asking me if I was getting sick."

OTHER RECENT RECALLS

Recent recalls due to potential **salmonella** contamination:

The Cincinnati-based Kroger Co. supermarket chain announced yesterday it's recalling some store brand mayonnaise sold in three states. No illnesses have been reported.

den Dulk Poultry Farms of Ripon, Calif., announced March 20 it was recalling organic brown eggs distributed under a variety of brand names in California and western Nevada.

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Union International Food Co. of Union City, Calif., announced Monday it's recalling 15-pound and smaller size packages of the Lian How brand spices and Uncle Chen brand white pepper & black pepper (whole and ground)

Federal health officials are investigating a multistate **salmonella** outbreak linked to tainted alfalfa sprouts marketed by CW Sprouts Inc.

Sidebar: OTHER RECENT RECALLS (see end of text)

Document NDAY000020090402e5420003w

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142



REUTERS

U.S. storms delay spring fieldwork, corn planting

509 words
1 April 2009
12:25
Reuters News
English
(c) 2009 Reuters Limited

CHICAGO, April 1 (Reuters) - Rainy and cold weather across the U.S. Midwest will delay spring fieldwork and early corn planting for at least another week, a forecaster said on Wednesday.

"The forecast is a bad combination of frequent precipitation and cold temperatures. We're just stuck here on fieldwork and early planting for the next week to 10 days," said Mike Palmerino, DTN Meteorlogix forecaster.

The soggy conditions were beginning to raise concerns that U.S. farmers could see another slow planting season similar to 2008. A year ago, the Midwest was plagued with heavy rains that eventually led to massive flooding across the belt by June, forcing farmers to replant many corn and soybean fields.

Scattered rains fell across the Corn Belt on Tuesday. Another storm will move through on Thursday, with 0.10 to 0.5 inch (0.25-1.27 cm) of precipitation, locally heavier expected for northern Missouri and southeastern Iowa.

Farms east of the Mississippi River will see 0.3 to 1.5 inch of rainfall on Thursday.

Additional rain mixed with snow was forecast for the weekend, with the lion's share falling in the eastern belt which could get another 0.3 to 1.5 inch of precipitation.

It will be cool, with temperatures staying below normal. Highs will range from the mid 40s to upper 50s degrees Fahrenheit (4-15 degrees Celsius).

Meteorlogix's Midwest six to 10-day forecast for Monday to Friday called for mostly below-normal temperatures and normal to above-normal precipitation.

NORTHERN PLAINS STAYS COLD EASING IMMEDIATE FLOOD WORRIES

The northern U.S. Plains spring wheat country is also seeing a heavy dose of spring precipitation, which will likely lead to wheat seeding delays and possibly some intended wheat acres switched to soybeans -- a later planted crop, Palmerino said.

"There is no sign that you are going to get much fieldwork done any time soon," he added.

Light to moderate snow fell from the eastern Dakotas to northwest Minnesota on Tuesday. More snow of 3 to 6 inches was forecast for Friday to Saturday from South Dakota to the southern portion of North Dakota.

The late-week snow should fall south out the flooded areas of the Red River Valley that encompasses the eastern Dakotas to northwestern Minnesota.

The area surrounding the Red River, which extends from North Dakota into Canada's Lake Winnipeg, battled floods over the weekend until the river receded.

The temperatures will remain below to much-below normal with highs in the mid 30s to mid 40s F.

"The good news is this cold weather is going to prevent any additional major flooding for now," Palmerino said.

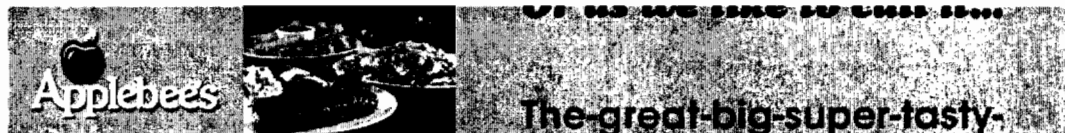
242

But he was not convinced the threat of flooding is over for the Red River Valley given the amount of snow still left on the ground. In Bismarck, North Dakota, there was still 16 inches of snow. (Reporting by Christine Stebbins; Editing by Marguerita Choy)

WEATHER-MIDWEST|LANGEN|ABN|C|GRO|MTL|SOF

Document LBA0000020090401e5410021a

Los Angeles Times



<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-climate2-2009apr02,0,1696993.story>

From the Los Angeles Times

Report outlines possible effects of warming on California

A compilation of research papers suggests that climate change will mean the state will have less water, experience a loss of cropland and see soaring wildfire rates.

By Bettina Boxall

April 2, 2009

As California warms in coming decades, farmers will have less water, the state could lose more than a million acres of cropland and forest fire rates will soar, according to a broad-ranging state report released Wednesday.

The document, which officials called the "the ultimate picture to date" of global warming's likely effect on California, consists of 37 research papers that examine an array of issues including water supply, air pollution and property losses.

Without actions to limit greenhouse gas emissions, "severe and costly climate impacts are possible and likely across California," warned state environmental protection secretary Linda Adams.

The draft Climate Action Team Report, an update of a 2006 assessment, concludes that some climate change effects could be more serious than previously thought.

By the final decades of the century, acreage burned across much of the state's northern forests could easily double and under some scenarios quadruple, said Anthony Westerling, an assistant professor of geography and environmental engineering at UC Merced.

The reason is simple: As the temperature rises, the fire season lengthens and woodlands get drier, burning more readily.

Moreover, if growth continues at the wild-land edge, more fire will mean mounting home losses -- as high as \$14 billion a year by century's end.

"If you spread development all through the Sierra foothills over the next 50 years," Westerling said, "you will have a situation like the hills of Southern California or Oakland" -- where wildfire has destroyed thousands of homes at a time.

One bit of good news is that in Southern California, the Santa Ana winds that have driven the region's worst conflagrations will blow less frequently, because temperature and pressure differences between sea and land will become less pronounced.

Researchers believe they have already seen a 30% drop in Santa Ana days between the 1960s and 1990s.

One of the less certain areas of climate change modeling involves precipitation patterns. Some studies have suggested that California could get wetter with global warming.

But Dan Cayan, a climate researcher at Scripps Institution of Oceanography at UC San Diego, said "the latest generation of simulations from global models are producing a drying over the Mediterranean and lower continental latitudes -- and California sits right in that regime."

By mid-century, annual precipitation in Southern California could decline by 10%, and by 5% farther north, in a band near the state's midpoint, according to the climate report. Little change is projected in the most northern reaches of California.

Cayan cautioned that "our tools to get at this are still pretty crude. These are only rough numbers."

The Sierra Nevada snowpack, which stores water and then slowly releases it to the river systems that feed the state's major reservoirs, will shrink by at least a quarter over the next four decades, previous studies have concluded.

Combined with drier and hotter conditions, that will create water shortages expected to fall most heavily on the state's agricultural sector in the Central Valley.

Urban areas should be able to make up for shortfalls by buying water from farms, which use most of the supplies in the state.

But that will drive up the cost of water, prompting farmers to fallow cropland and abandon irrigated pasture and less profitable crops such as cotton, alfalfa and rice.

UC Davis agricultural economics professor Richard Howitt estimates that the Central Valley's farm acreage will shrink by roughly 1.5 million acres, or 20%, by 2050.

Revenue losses will be less steep -- about 10% or \$3 billion a year -- thanks to shifts to more profitable fruits, vegetables and nuts.

The three water studies included in the climate report "describe relatively modest impacts of climate change on the water sector,"

according to the document.

But in a news conference, Adams and UC Berkeley economics professor Michael Hanemann said those findings were based on a "rosy scenario" of average water conditions as well as the legal and physical ability to move massive amounts of water from one user to another.

Global warming is expected to increase weather swings, from years of flooding to severe drought.

"There are more bad years than before and the bad years are worse in terms of shortages," Hanemann said.

In other areas, hydropower production is expected to decline along with the snowpack, while statewide electricity use could shoot up 55% by the end of the century and ozone pollution will increase.

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Los Angeles Times

Main News; Editorial pages Desk

Making up for lost wilderness; Obama and Congress have a lot of work to do to undo the Bush assault on public land.

James William Gibson

James William Gibson is a professor of sociology at Cal State Long Beach and the author of the forthcoming book, "A Reenchanted World: The Quest for a New Kinship with Nature."

1,011 words

2 April 2009

Los Angeles Times

Home Edition

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English

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On Monday, President Obama signed the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act, placing more than 2 million acres of public land in nine states under Wilderness Act protection. The new legislation preserves remote glacial valleys in Wyoming, fragile deserts in California and dense forests in northern Michigan, making these and other tracts of pristine land permanently off-limits to road building, oil and gas drilling and commercial **timber** harvesting.

But for all the joy the law brings to those who treasure America's wild places, it was nevertheless a bittersweet victory. After eight years of the George W. Bush administration's assault on public lands, there's still so much to be done — and undone.

During the Bush era, millions of acres of public land were leased for oil and gas drilling and logging. The Endangered Species Act was ignored and weakened. Snowmobiles and off-road vehicles were allowed to invade national forests and parks. Mountaintops in the Appalachians were dynamited to mine coal.

The damage was so deep that it's hard to know where to begin. But let's start with oil and gas exploration. On President Bush's watch, vast tracts of undeveloped public land were opened to drilling, and federal employees were directed to expedite the process. Utah field officers for the Bureau of Land Management, for example, were told by supervisors in one memorandum to instruct staff that "when an oil and gas lease parcel or when an application to drill comes in the door ... this work is their No. 1 priority." During the eight years Bush was in office, the amount of public land leased to gas and oil companies increased several-fold, bringing the total number of acres leased to 44 million of the 258 million acres the BLM manages, including 5 million acres designated as wild mustang habitat.

The Bush administration also ignored rules that had been put in place to protect undeveloped public lands. The Clinton administration's "Roadless Area **Conservation** Rule" was aimed at stopping road building in 58.5 million acres of forest lands. But when Bush came into office, officials of his administration let it be known that the Justice Department would not defend the rule. Soon, battles raged in courts across the West, producing conflicting decisions. Because of the legal disputes, only seven miles of proposed forest roads have been built, but the rule's ultimate fate is still undecided.

And then there is the Endangered Species Act. During the Bush years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was loath to extend protections to new plants and animals. By 2007, it had voluntarily listed only four new species. Petitions and lawsuits by environmental groups had forced the addition of 54 more species. But meanwhile, 279 candidates for listing were stuck in an interminable review process.

And even when species did make it on the list, the department refused to designate "critical habitat" necessary for the species' survival. In late 2008, the Interior Department inspector general, Earl E. Devaney, concluded that political interference by department brass repeatedly overturned scientific reviews and that there was "an unwritten policy to exclude as many areas as practicable from critical habitat designation."

But the report did little to curb the Bush administration. Shortly before leaving office, it issued new rules declaring that federal agencies whose plans might affect endangered species no longer needed to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service or the National Marine Fisheries Service before proceeding.

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Another Bush rule declared that when any Arctic species, such as polar bears, was under review for listing, scientists and officials could not consider the effects of greenhouse gases produced outside the Arctic.

Gale Norton, Bush's first secretary of the Interior, loved snowmobiles and off-road vehicles, and pushed the gates to the nation's public lands wide open for them. Today, more than 60,000 snowmobiles roam Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks each winter, creating a blue haze of exhaust along popular trails. Park workers don government-issued respirators and hearing protection because of hydrocarbon emissions that are 10 times higher than on Los Angeles' freeways and noise levels approaching those of large airports.

It was the Bush administration's utter disregard of the Clean Water Act that made it possible for the coal industry to destroy a large swath of the Appalachians. At first, the administration simply ignored the act and issued permits that allowed coal companies to dump mining waste into streams. Then, in 2002, after losing legal challenges, it issued rules that made "valley fill" specifically exempt from the clean-water law. Two years later, it began to undo another rule, one that said debris couldn't be dumped too near streams. In December 2008, this requirement was officially removed. About 2,000 miles of Appalachian streams now lie buried under mining debris.

—

The Obama administration and Congress should be applauded for protecting 2 million acres of public land, but that does not begin to make up for all that was lost during the Bush years. And swift action is necessary to stop further erosion of environmental protections. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar has only until May 9 to reverse the Bush changes to Endangered Species Act rules. Obama should order his Justice Department to settle lawsuits filed by environmental groups, vacating many Bush policies. And Congress needs to pass a strong legislative package, bills such as the proposed Roadless Area **Conservation** Act, which would protect wilderness areas in our national forests.

Not all of the damage to our land and its creatures can be reversed. But new laws and federal regulations could at least create a solid legal foundation on which large-scale restoration can begin.

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Vilsack says Legislation should not Impact Livestock Producer Profitability

04/01/2009
Gary Truitt



Legislation in Congress would take away livestock producers' ability to use antibiotics. The USDA has not thrown support behind the bill. Groups opposed to antibiotics in livestock feed are supporting a bill that would virtually eliminate a producer's ability to use these drugs in livestock production. Livestock groups are opposed to the legislation, and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack says he also has serious reservations about the bill.

In an interview with HAT Vilsack said, "Well I think we have to be very careful that whatever steps we take in legislation do not make it more difficult for livestock operators to be productive and profitable. I think we need to be concerned

about making sure the safety and health of these animals are protected, so I would want to take a look at that legislation, and look at it from a lens of how is this going to effect the productivity and profitability of livestock in the United States."

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Vilsack said this is not the right time to be placing additional costs on livestock producers. "The margins are very, very difficult. This has been a tough time particularly for pork, and to a certain extent for cattle. And I think we need to be careful that we don't restrict these folks to a point where they can't make a living."

The bill's supporters say the routine use of these drugs will create diseases that are resistant to antibiotics.

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4/1/2009 8:45:00 AM

Grassley Presses USDA to Implement New Storage Facility Loan Program
by Jim Wiesemeyer

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Blames USDA's slow farm bill implementation process in getting regulations issued

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Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) sent a letter Tuesday to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack regarding the delay in implementing a revised storage facility loan program which is mostly used for grain bins.

The program has low-interest financing so that producers can build and/or upgrade farm storage. The program was expanded in the 2008 Farm Bill, but Grassley charged that USDA “has been very slow in getting many of the Farm Bill changes implemented, but this is one that ought to be relatively simple because there's quite a history behind these programs, I'll bet, going back to the 1930's, at least the 1940's when we were talking about the grain bank.”

Grassley said the facility loan program is “fully paid for and, obviously, in a time of high unemployment, it would create real jobs in Iowa. And we know the president's always talking about things that need to be done to stimulate the economy, and this is exactly the type of spending that would put people to work.”

Grassley said the USDA “hang up” has to do with releasing the regulations for the program. “I assume that the regulations that were under the old farm bill wouldn't be applicable to the 2008 Farm Bill. And this is probably a lower priority than a lot of other things like the safety net for farmers.”

Comments: On this topic, there is little defense for USDA's turtle-like approach to implementing the program. There are still a lot of career staffers who can get the work done, so what is stopping them? Probably lawyers!

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[• Return to Story](#)**VeraSun, Valero seal the deal on ethanol asset sale**

4/01/2009, 11:16 AM CDT

VeraSun Energy Corporation this week announced that it closed on the sale of assets to Valero Renewable Fuels that included five ethanol production facilities and a development site. The facilities are located in Aurora, South Dakota; Fort Dodge, Charles City and Hartley, Iowa; and Welcome, Minnesota, and the development site is in Reynolds, Indiana.

VeraSun Energy selected Valero Renewable Fuels as the successful bidder for seven of its ethanol production facilities and the development site on March 17, 2009, company officials say, as part of an auction sale process. Valero Renewable Fuels is a subsidiary of Valero Energy Corporation, North America's largest petroleum refiner and marketer based in San Antonio, Texas. Valero purchased the ethanol production facilities in Aurora, Fort Dodge, Charles City, Hartley and Welcome, in addition to the Reynolds site, for \$350 million. This group of assets was part of a "stalking horse" bid submitted by Valero in early February.

Valero also successfully bid \$72 million for the Albert City facility and \$55 million for the Albion facility. The purchase price also includes working capital and other certain adjustments. Closing on the Albert City and Albion facilities is expected in the coming weeks.

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VeraSun also expects to close on the sale of its remaining facilities in the next several weeks.

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Guidelines issued for agriculture's role in climate legislation

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, 4:07 PM

by Ken Anderson

The coalition known as 25 x '25 has issued guidelines that it says will insure a strong role for agriculture and forestry in climate change legislation.

"We really feel this is a new day for agriculture and forestry," says Nathan Rudgers, former New York Agriculture Commissioner and chairman of the 25 x '25 Carbon Work Group, "and rather than ducking, denying and deflecting, we have the opportunity to provide solutions. Offset provisions are critical and we need correct, enabling policy that includes agriculture and forestry."

Among the coalition's guidelines is one that says if lawmakers and the Obama administration ultimately settle on a cap-and-trade system, agriculture and forestry should be identified as "uncapped sectors" capable of generating significant quantities of greenhouse gas reductions.

"Congress and the White House have made clear their intention to address global warming and a national climate change policy is expected soon," says Bart Ruth, chairman of the 25 x '25 Policy Committee and a member of the Carbon Work Group. "The time for agriculture and forestry to get in the game is now."

Ruth, a former president of the American Soybean Association, cites EPA figures that show agriculture contributes some seven percent of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs), but can also provide a reduction of U.S. GHGs of anywhere from 10 to 25 percent. He says agriculture's ability to reduce GHGs can lead to significant environmental improvements as well as new revenue streams.

Former National Corn Growers Association president Fred Yoder, also a member of the 25 x '25 Carbon Work Group, says agriculture must find ways to benefit from future climate legislation.

"We just had the Waxman bill introduced recently, and there are lots of things in there that may be good for agriculture—and maybe some things that need to be changed," Yoder says. "So we really need to be engaged and understand the language that everybody's talking about."

While some in agriculture may still question whether climate change is real or not, Yoder says it's time to get on board.

"I've been farming for 35 years and I think I've definitely seen a change in the climate's characteristics over the last years," Yoder says. "It seems to me when I first started, we had a month or two to get the crops in. And now, if you don't get those crops planted within a couple of weeks, then you've missed that window."

"So I think something's happening out there," he continued. "I'm certainly no scientist, but I think it's well worth our time to try to figure out a way we can turn this to our advantage."

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The 25 x '25 report acknowledges that EPA should be the administrator of a cap and trade program—but it also requests that the USDA be the administering agency with respect to agriculture and forestry offset project rules.

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Grassley says storage building loan program needs to get going

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, 4:49 PM

by Julie Harker

The USDA loan program for storage facilities needs to get going, according to Senate Ag Committee member Chuck Grassley. The Iowa Senator says it was fully authorized and funded in the 2008 Farm Bill, so USDA needs to get things moving, "The program's fully paid for and obviously in a time of high unemployment it would create real jobs."

Grassley says USDA needs to get the regulations finalized so farmers can apply for loans in order to upgrade or build grain bins and other farm storage. "We know the president's always talking about things that need to be done to stimulate the economy and this is exactly the type of spending that would put people to work," says Grassley.

The Storage Facility Loan Program offers low-interest loans to farmers.

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Film is another poke at agriculture

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, 4:26 PM

No sooner is HBO's "Death on a Factory Farm" released and there comes news of an additional cinematic jab at agriculture.

A Pork Industry News story says that this June, a major motion picture called "Food Inc." will be released claiming to reveal the so-called truth about "corporate agriculture" and contemporary production practices.

The film, billed as a "documentary," is from "Fast Food Nation," author Eric Schlosser, and Robert Kenner.

The HBO piece that aired in March focused on a 2006 case involving images of animal abuse on an Ohio hog farm.

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THE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER FOR AGRIBUSINESS

Low dairy prices trigger MILC payments

(4/1/2009)

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced today that because of low dairy prices across the country, producers participating in USDA's Milk Income Loss Contract (MILC) program will begin to receive payments.

"Today, as a result of low dairy prices, we are distributing MILC payments to ensure that dairy producers have the financial assistance they need. This action will also stimulate local economies," said Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack.

USDA makes MILC payments on a monthly basis when the Boston Class I milk price falls below \$16.94/cwt. as adjusted for feed costs. USDA determines the per hundredweight payment rate for the applicable month by subtracting the Boston Class I price for that month from the \$16.94 MILC payment trigger price, established in the 2008 farm bill, as adjusted for feed costs, and multiplying the difference by 45%. The monthly Boston price along with final MILC payment rates are posted online at www.fsa.usda.gov.

USDA expects to issue MILC payments on milk produced in March in early May and MILC payments on milk produced in April in early June, after USDA has adjusted the MILC payment trigger price for feed costs and determined the final payment rate for those months. MILC payments may also be triggered in future months if the MILC payment trigger price is below \$16.94/cwt.

FSA makes payments up to the maximum eligible pounds of milk produced and marketed by each operation per fiscal year. The annual maximum eligible pound limit per dairy operation is 2.985 million lb. per fiscal year.



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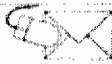
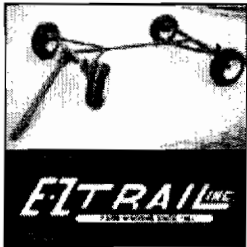
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Two Farm Groups Call for U.S. to Open Travel to Cuba

USAgNet - 04/01/2009

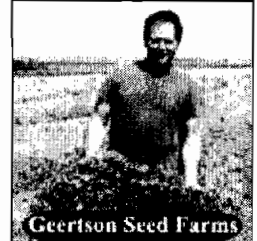
American Farm Bureau Federation President Bob Stallman joined congressional members on Tuesday on Capitol Hill to advocate the removal of travel restrictions to Cuba. Stallman spoke in support of S. 428, which opens Cuba to travel by U.S. citizens and gives the U.S. president authority to restrict travel to Cuba only in times of war or imminent danger.

"This legislation is an important step in easing trade restrictions on Cuba," Stallman said. "Allowing unrestricted travel to Cuba will increase U.S. agricultural sales and boost tourism."

U.S. agricultural sales to Cuba have been on average \$400 million annually since 2000, with top commodity sales including poultry, wheat, soybeans, rice and dairy. With passage of S. 428, AFBF expects sales to increase.

In addition, language in the omnibus appropriations bill further aids U.S. agriculture by allowing travel on a general license for those making agricultural sales to Cuba rather than the specific license currently needed. This would ease delays that significantly impact the ability to transact commercial sales with Cuba, which in some cases, have been lost to U.S. competitors because of the restriction.

Other priorities for AFBF in regard to Cuba include commercially defining "cash payments in advance" as intended by Congress in the 2000 Trade Sanctions and Reform Act; allowing the country to directly wire payment to U.S. banks instead of going through a third-country bank as it does now; and issuing visas for Cuban inspectors to travel to the U.S. to meet with suppliers, inspect facilities and verify procedures and standards associated with the sale of U.S. food and agricultural exports to Cuba.



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Disaster Checks May Be Delayed Computer Problems Could Mean No Checks Until 2010



Jerry Hagstrom DTN Political Correspondent

Bio + Contact

Wed Apr 1, 2009 11:01 AM CDT

WASHINGTON (DTN) -- Continued computer problems at USDA could delay disaster payment checks until 2010, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told House Ag Appropriations Subcommittee members Tuesday.

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont., and Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad, D-N.D., insisted on including in the 2008 farm bill a permanent program of payments when weather-related disasters occur because it has become increasingly difficult to convince Congress to pass farm disaster programs when the disasters occur.

Vilsack said he does not expect to be able to make disaster payments until 2010 because USDA is "hampered" by computer problems. The statement seemed to shock committee members and Chairman Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., and other members pressed him to implement the program faster.

Vilsack did not take questions from reporters after the hearing, but he could be using the issue as leverage to convince Congress to give the Farm Service Agency more money for computers. The economic stimulus package included \$50 million for a new computer system, but USDA wants at least \$350 million.

The subcommittee also pressured Vilsack to move faster on reform of nutrition and food safety programs. Those concerns are indications of battles to come this year over proposed changes in the foods served children in school meals and over changes in food safety programs to try to reduce illnesses and deaths from food-borne illnesses.

The administration wants to spend \$1 billion more per year on child nutrition programs to buy more fruits and vegetables and other nutritious foods for school feeding programs, Vilsack said. But Rep. Sam Farr, D-Conn., urged him also to reform management of those programs and make changes in the government's food purchases. Farr noted that the government spends \$90 million per year purchasing mozzarella cheese for the school lunch program, but only \$51,000 for fresh tomatoes. The food purchasing program is focused on "old commodities," Farr said.

Farr also complained that a poultry research station in Georgia is "sucking all the money" that should go to a specialty crop research station in Salinas, Calif., that could address the concerns about salmonella in fruits and vegetables.

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Vilsack noted he is committed to solving USDA's civil rights issues with farmers and employees, but Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., D-Ill., told him he believes students in his district will get their civil rights only when they get an improved school lunch. Vilsack agreed to eat lunch in a school in Jackson's district and decide if the meal is up to USDA's nutrition standards, but Vilsack did not respond directly when Jackson also said that school lunch meals should be served at USDA so the staff would know what they are like.

Noting that a USDA official told the subcommittee if Congress reauthorizes the child nutrition programs this year it could take three years to institute reforms in school meals to fight obesity, DeLauro told Vilsack such a wait would be "intolerable."

Obama has appointed Vilsack and the as-yet-unconfirmed HHS secretary and FDA commissioner to a food safety group to resolve the conflicts among the 15 agencies that have a hand in food safety. Vilsack said he believes there is a basic conflict between USDA, which uses a prevention approach to deal with its responsibilities for meat and poultry, and FDA, which uses a mitigation approach of dealing with problems when they arise among the foods for which it has responsibility.

"It would make sense to focus on prevention," Vilsack said. But House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., warned him that the administration does not have a long time to figure out its position because the House Energy and Commerce Committee is already writing a bill. "We do intend to be very, very aggressive. We understand lives are at stake," Vilsack said.

Rep. Tom Latham, R-Iowa, asked Vilsack to explain why the administration proposed phasing out direct payments to farmers who have sales of more than \$500,000 -- an idea that farm groups and Congress has rejected. Vilsack said the administration wanted to raise money for nutrition programs by cutting the direct payments to the 90,000 biggest crop farmers while leaving in place the programs that pay the farmers when prices are low, but he acknowledged that Congress might make other choices.

Vilsack also announced that the administration has managed to solve a financial crisis at the Foreign Agricultural Service and will not have to impose the furloughs of employees that Bush administration officials had said might be needed. He said he has acted on a USDA Inspector General's report that found USDA lacked a strategy for prompting the sale of genetically-engineered agricultural commodities overseas by ordering the USDA Research, Education and Economics division to develop a strategy within six months. Vilsack was a big promoter of biotechnology as governor of Iowa and President Barack Obama's decision to appoint him as USDA secretary was both praised and criticized because of his biotech stand.

At the beginning of the hearing, Vilsack testified that he has extended the deadline to sign up for the farm program from June 1 until August 14 so that farmers will have more time to decide whether to participate in the new average crop revenue program known as ACRE instead of the traditional program. He also announced that USDA would make Milk Income Loss Contract payments to troubled dairy farmers this week and use USDA's Section 32 authority to help other troubled farmers by buying walnuts, pork, turkey and lamb.

Jerry Hagstrom can be reached at jerry.hagstrom@dtm.com.

(CZ:AM)

04-01-09

Senate Ag Committee promises swift USDA confirmations

By Jon H. Harsch

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Impatient to accelerate full implementation of 2008 Farm Bill provisions, Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Tom Harkin (D-IA) promised accelerated action on confirming three key USDA nominations: Kathleen Merrigan for Deputy Secretary of Agriculture, Jim Miller for Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agriculture Services, and Joe Leonard, Jr. for Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights.

As he closed Wednesday afternoon's confirmation hearing for the three nominees, Harkin gave senators just three hours to submit any additional questions – and gave USDA just one day to provide responses. The goal is full Senate confirmation of Merrigan, Miller and Leonard before Congress heads home for Easter.



Kathleen Merrigan, Joe Leonard, Jr. & Jim Miller at their Senate confirmation hearing. Photo: Alice Welch, USDA

Committee questioning and comments focused on two main issues: improving USDA's performance on civil rights and Farm Bill implementation. Harkin pointed out that civil rights problems at the department have been an ongoing concern for more than 15 years and that "USDA has a vast backlog of race discrimination claims from employees and customers." He noted that "African-American farmers continue to file and seek to settle cases involving the Pigford litigation" and that "Native American, Hispanic and female farmers are all currently suing the Department for program discrimination." Harkin and

Ranking Member Saxby Chambliss (D-GA) welcomed Leonard's commitment to tackle civil rights problems and Harkin noted that Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack is firmly committed to dealing with past complaints and eliminating discrimination going forward.

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Both Merrigan and Miller made it clear that they are committed to implementing Farm Bill provisions as quickly as possible, including finalizing rules for new emergency disaster provisions and the Biomass Crop Assistance Program (BCAP).

Senator Chambliss called on Merrigan, a long-time advocate of organic agriculture, to assure the committee that she will serve all parts of U.S. agriculture. For an audio report on the exchange and Merrigan's assurances which satisfied the senator's concerns, click on Stewart Doan's News Network update for Wednesday.

In her testimony, Merrigan noted that after her own six years on the Senate Agriculture Committee staff helping draft farm legislation, "I came to understand first-hand how essential it is for members of the committee to receive timely, robust, and honest assessments from the Administration on issues before the committee. For this reason, I want to begin my testimony pledging that, if confirmed, I will always prioritize answering the committee's questions and calls for assistance."

Merrigan, who served previously at USDA as Administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service, also emphasized her own commitment to Farm Bill implementation. She explained that "I understand that farmers and ranchers need certainty. In some areas of the country, farmers have already begun or are about to begin planting and they need to fully understand the programs that they will be utilizing. If confirmed, I understand that it will be my job to assist the Secretary and other leaders in the department to ensure that this law is implemented as Congress intended and as quickly as possible."

Miller promised to deal with "The cost/price squeeze faced by producers in each agriculture sector and each region of the country" and to ensure that in the important areas of civil rights, "Discrimination in any form will not be tolerated." Reflecting the wide reach of his responsibilities if confirmed as Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agriculture Services, Miller said he is determined to:

- Conclude the Departmental review of the 2008 Farm Bill regulations promulgated by the previous administration and press to issue the regulations pertaining to the 2009 commodity programs as well as other important provisions such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Biomass Crop Assistance Program (BCAP) as soon as is practical.
- Ascertain the status and expedite the process of developing the regulations pertaining to the implementation of the disaster provisions of the 2008 Farm Bill as amended by subsequent legislation.
- Examine the tools available to the Department to help alleviate the crisis conditions that exist within specific sectors of production agriculture such as dairy.
- Review the public comments and initiate the process to promulgate the rules pertaining to the payment limitation provisions for the 2010 commodity program year.
- Work to ensure the agriculture export programs supported by the Foreign Agriculture Service continue to meet the needs of the cooperator groups and

stakeholders in their efforts to expand U.S. agriculture sales abroad and help alleviate hunger overseas.

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- Implement the modifications to the federal crop insurance program as prescribed by the 2008 Farm Bill.
- Initiate preparations for the upcoming round of negotiations of the Standard Reinsurance Agreement between USDA and its private sector insurance partners.
- Work within the Department and with Congress to develop a realistic and workable plan to modernize the information technology at USDA necessary to ensure the efficient delivery of its programs.

To read the full Merrigan, Miller and Leonard statements, or watch a video of the confirmation hearing, click on: <http://agriculture.senate.gov/>

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04-01-09

25x'25 coalition spells out imperatives for climate legislation

By Agri-Pulse Staff

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Agriculture and forestry have much to contribute in stemming climate change, and with the appropriate policies have much to gain, members of the 25x'25 Steering Committee said Wednesday.

The Steering Committee issued *Agriculture and Forestry in a Reduced Carbon Economy: Solutions from the Land*, a set of "policy principles and imperatives that can help stakeholders and policy makers guide the nation's transition to a reduced carbon economy," said Nathan Rudgers, a member of the Steering Committee. The principles were issued at a media teleconference held during the 5th National 25x'25 Renewable Energy Summit held at the Sheraton Crystal City, Arlington, VA.

"A new energy future is unfolding; one that will maximize reliance on clean renewable forms of energy," Rudgers said. "Climate legislation will be a part of that future. It is no longer a question of 'If?' It is now a question of 'When?' and 'How?' America's farms, ranches and forests can provide cost effective and value added greenhouse gas emission reduction services and it's time for the solution sets they can provide to be integrated into the nation's overall climate change strategy."

Rudgers is also the chairman of the Steering Committee's Carbon Work Group, a special panel of more than 50 nationally recognized producers, economists, conservationists, and academic and business leaders that authored *Solutions from the Land*. He said agriculture and forestry are well positioned to provide solutions to climate change, and with the correct enabling policy, the two sectors have much to gain. "We can reduce, sequester and convert greenhouse gases, and in doing so maximize land-based solutions to climate change," he said.

However, to insure the active participation of agriculture and forestry in any new climate change regulatory system, "policymakers need to understand the benefits and challenges these sectors will face in addressing climate change, and this will only happen if agricultural interests have a seat at the table," Rudgers said. "There are still many unknowns around how the new greenhouse gas regulatory system will be structured, but agriculture and forestry leaders are prepared to do their part to help address this growing global challenge."

chicagotribune.com

Cow headed for the slaughterhouse makes daring escape and is bought by animal-rights activist

By Associated Press

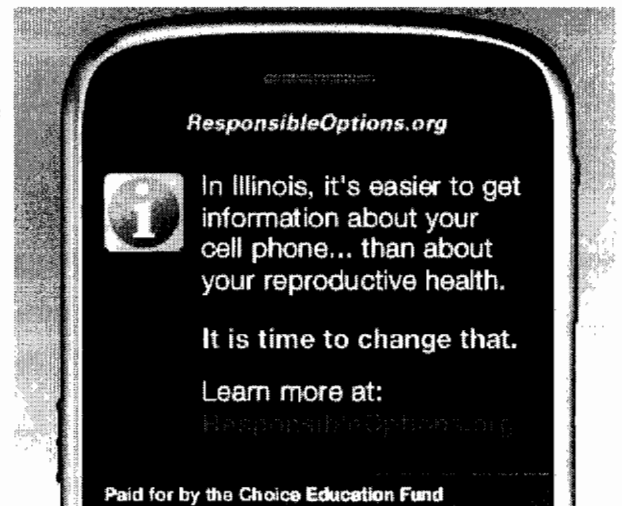
3:22 PM CDT, April 1, 2009

HUTCHINSON, Kan. (AP) — A dairy cow was headed for the slaughterhouse until an animal-rights activist bought her after the Brown Jersey made a run for it. Farmer Calvin Nisly was taking the 5-year-old cow named Linda to a sale barn Tuesday and had stopped at a veterinarian's office to be sure she wasn't pregnant. On the way back to the trailer, an annoyed Linda escaped through a fence and led Nisly and several law enforcement vehicles on a chase.

Soon after the cow was captured, Hutchinson resident and animal-rights activist Danny Brizendine stepped into the bizarre scene and learned that Linda was headed for slaughter. Brizendine agreed to buy her for \$700, and paid \$300 to pasture and feed her for the rest of the year.

Information from: The Hutchinson News, <http://www.hutchnews.com>

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